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ABSTRACT

Institutions of higher education have been unable or unwilling to make constructive and consistent use of student leadership as an advocate for the institutions. This is especially paradoxical in the case of community colleges, since two-year college students often have significant links to the community. If the potential for leadership among these students were systematically cultivated, a powerful voice could be created to help colleges explain their missions and needs to lawmakers, the media, and the voting public. Some 8 million voters are currently attending community colleges across the nation, a sufficient number to provide a major source of political strength for higher education. Community colleges are facing financial constraints at local, state, and federal levels. Among the financial issues affecting community college students, obvious examples are student financial aid, employee educational assistance, and workforce training programs. Pell grants in particular are essential to many community college students' ability to attend school, and student leaders are calling for a strong student advocacy role with congress and state agencies to reverse the decline of Pell Grant funding. Community college student leaders are building the framework for a state and national network in the American Student Association of Community Colleges (ASACC). ASACC seeks to help students develop and expand leadership skills through networking and hands-on organizational experiences and to give the colleges a strong and cohesive citizen-consumer voice. (AC)

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THE CASE FOR NATIONAL STUDENT LEADERSHIP ON COMMUNITY COLLEGE ISSUES

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THE CASE FOR NATIONAL STUDENT LEADERSHIP ON COMMUNITY COLLEGE ISSUES

Lisa Ryan

A general weakness of higher education has been its inability or unwillingness to make constructive and consistent use of student leadership as an advocate for the institution. From the perspective of student leadership, the fact that student advocacy is rarely utilized to its full potential represents a significant missed opportunity among our nation's colleges and universities. The situation seems even more paradoxical in the case of community colleges, whose students often have significant links to the community. Community college students are typically older and more established than the stereotypical college student who is just out of high school. They hold jobs, vote, pay taxes, and are concerned about their community's well-being. If the potential for leadership among these students were systematically cultivated, a new and powerful voice could be created that would go far in helping colleges explain their missions and needs to lawmakers, the media, and the voting public.

Students as a Source of Strength for Community Colleges

The simple fact is, given the numbers of students attending community colleges across the nation today, students could provide a major source of political strength for higher education. Faculty, trustees, and presidents will always remain vitally important bases of influence, but the efforts of these groups could be greatly expanded if the potential of an organized student voice were truly realized.

Consider the numbers in community colleges. According to data that American Council on Education (ACE) President Robert Atwell presented February 27, 1994, at the Washington seminar of the American Student Association of Community Colleges (ASACC), higher education now serves more than 17 million students in annual enrollment. More than 40 percent of the students earning credits and degrees, some eight million voters, are attending community colleges.

Placed in perspective, this makes the community college student body nearly *three times as large* as the membership of the National Rifle Association (NRA), an organization renowned for making its views heard. If community colleges want to ensure that their needs and concerns are heard, as the NRA and similar groups have often done, then clearly a political force of eight million people could be a most valuable asset.

The Need for Student Activism

As expectations for community colleges increase and governmental budgets grow tighter, the need for two-year colleges to flex their political muscle has never been more pressing. When President Clinton addressed the 1994 Annual Convention of the American Council on Education, he clearly indicated that he looks primarily to community colleges for the superior frontline work force the nation must build to sustain its global leadership and its standard of living. More and more employers, large and small, are turning to community colleges for the same thing.

It is a challenge that will not be met with greater resources. Yet community colleges—and the students they serve—are feeling the pinch at the local, state, and federal level. In a recent publication, Lawrence Gold, Director of the Higher Education Department of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), cited a recent survey of state colleges that "shows two-thirds were unable to add to their operating budgets last year, in spite of growing enrollments. Nearly four out of five institutions reported increases in class size during 1993. Course sections were cut in ten states. Library acquisitions were reduced in 17 states, teaching supplies were cut in 23 states, and research funds were dropped in nine states." This is not the kind of trend that will deliver a world-class work force.

Gold went on to conclude, "Most important, the budget crisis has forced higher education unions to move beyond the bargaining table to the political arena, to take on no less a job than saving their institutions from evisceration. The skills of budget analysis, coalition building, lobbying, media relations and political action are now central to the union mission." These sorts of skills are just as critical when other college constituencies must communicate the interests of the college and its

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students to government and the public.

Among the many issues of interest to community college students, obvious examples are student financial aid—particularly Pell Grant funding—employee educational assistance, and workforce training programs. Pell grants are the lifeblood of many community college students, and student leaders recognize the need to defend this program vigorously. For example, at Tidewater Community College, about 3,000 students, or 30% of the student body FTE, depend upon Pell Grants to attend college. As valiant as the efforts of administrators, faculty, and trustees have been over the past 15 years, they have not succeeded in stemming the decline of the Pell Grant's purchasing power. Student leaders are now calling for a strong student advocacy role as the best hope of reversing this trend.

In visits to members of Congress during the ASACC seminar to urge better funding of Pell Grants, community college student leaders raised the following concern in their legislative priorities statement: "Weakened Pell Grants are putting increased numbers of low-income students in community colleges. As much as one-third of the FTE in community colleges is represented by students with Pell Grants. The program is built upon the promise of universalizing access and promoting diversity—but when enrollment becomes concentrated by class, that purpose is lost, and higher education as a whole is weakened."

A strong student voice could be especially effective in the state arena, where the network of student leadership can be more easily and readily called into play. The AFT guidebook, "How to Fight State Budget Cuts," underscores the importance of students as advocacy partners. Trustees who have included student leaders in their annual team visits to Congress have often observed that the students are the advocates that the lawmakers most want to meet. Similarly, at the state capitols, students can bring the numbers necessary to turn the tide when issues such as enrollment caps, budget cuts, child care, and the acceptance of transfer credits crop up on the legislative agenda.

Using the Student Leadership Network

Student advocacy is much more, however, than just potential. Community college student leaders already are building the framework for a state-level and national network—the American Student Association of Community Colleges (ASACC), based in Washington, D.C. ASACC's purposes are twofold: to help students develop and expand leadership skills through networking and other hands-on organizational experiences, and to give the colleges a strong and cohesive citizen-consumer voice in support of their mission and needs.

ASACC activities and membership services help direct community college student activism into an effective and productive force on behalf of two-year colleges and their students. A monthly newsletter, the *ASACC Alert*, keeps members informed on legislation and national programs that drive student aid, access, and workforce development. Regional meetings bring together student leaders from within the same state or area to share ideas and resources, to plan strategies for statewide concerns, and to support and learn from each other in maximizing their impact in support of their colleges. An annual seminar held in Washington, D.C., prepares students for effectively communicating the need for support of student financial aid, workforce training, and other federal programs that are critical to the community college mission. The seminar encourages students, often working with their college's trustees or student advisors, to take part in the action on Capitol Hill by scheduling time for congressional visits and by equipping students with up-to-the-moment information and skills. ASACC's annual seminar is already getting results; over the last four years, the attendees have been an active voice in helping change the Pell Grant formula, extend employee educational assistance, and pass (and ensure funding for) the Tech-Prep and Scientific and Advanced Technology Acts.

Conclusion

Students offer a great reservoir of potential support that is seriously underutilized in higher education, especially in community colleges. Because community college students are mostly working adults who are more mature and politically aware, they are both interested in and ready for a higher level of advocacy than colleges have traditionally expected from their student associations. All that is needed to turn this wealth of potential into a dynamic community college voice is a friendly, supportive, and respectful attitude from presidents, trustees, and student advisors. If shown the true needs of the college through consistent communication and cultivation, they could serve the college as powerful champions on every level of government, from city hall to Capitol Hill. Recognized as the active citizens, interested consumers, and willing partners in community college advocacy that they are, student leaders can and should play a vital and important role in representing the interests of their colleges.

Lisa Ryan, a political science major at Tidewater Community College, VA, is president of the American Student Association of Community Colleges, as well as president of her college's student association. For more information, contact ASACC at 1643 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20009 — Guest editor, Carol Cross.

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